

PLENTY FOR ALL

By ERNEST ERBER

*A Popular Presentation of the
Socialist Position*

80 Pages

25¢ Per Copy

Subscribe to —

LABOR ACTION

and read about

SOCIALISM

THE TRADE UNIONS

NATIONAL POLITICS

INTERNATIONAL EVENTS

LABOR ACTION

4 Court Square

Long Island City 1, N. Y.

Please enter my subscription to LABOR ACTION as follows:

- ☐ 6 months subscription (26 issues) for 50¢.
- ☐ 1 year subscription (52 issues), together with the pamphlet, "Plenty for All," for \$1.00.

Name

(please print)

Address

City

Zone

State

DON'T PAY MORE RENT!

•
BY
IRVING
HOWE

Alex Garson

5¢

Published by
WORKERS PARTY PUBLICATIONS
4 Court Square
Long Island City 1, N. Y.
for the
WORKERS PARTY OF THE UNITED STATES

Set up, printed and bound by union labor
October, 1947
In bundles of 25 or more, 3c per copy



Don't Pay More Rent

THIS is a call to action. Every word in this pamphlet is intended as preparation for action by tenants in the present crucial rent situation. Every word is meant as ammunition in the desperate fight which American tenants have to wage against the landlords' attempt to raise rents. In that spirit this pamphlet is written; in the same spirit, we hope, it will be read; and most important of all, in the same spirit IT WILL LEAD TO TENANT ORGANIZATION AND ACTION!

What we have to say is very simple. We propose that tenants get together and organize on a house-to-house basis. We propose that tenants refuse to pay any more rent by taking a firm, united stand against the landlords. And that while they are doing this, they also organize to fight evictions in their neighborhood.

To achieve this aim, we propose the following specific steps:

(1) ORGANIZE THE TENANTS IN YOUR HOUSE OR BLOCK. Each house should have a tenants' committee, which represents the tenants as a whole and is elected by all the tenants. This committee should serve as the executive organ of the tenants, leading their fight. Tenant committees of the houses in a given neighborhood should get together to coordinate their work and help each other.

(2) The first point on the agenda of the tenants' committee should be a **UNITED RESISTANCE TO ANY LANDLORD ATTEMPT TO RAISE RENTS! Under the law, you don't have to pay more rent... unless you agree. And there's no reason to agree. As we will show later**

in this pamphlet, the landlords are making **UNPRECEDENTED profits**. To agree to rent increases is to give yourself a wage cut. Agree in tenants' meetings to refuse rent increases in a body. **DON'T PAY MORE RENT!**

(3) There will unquestionably be a wave of landlord attempts in the next few months to evict a great many tenants. They will use all sorts of pretexts—"renovations," "need the place for themselves" and other legal dodges allowed by the jelly-fish "rent control" bill recently passed by Congress and signed by the President. **IN THE NEXT FEW MONTHS, THIS WILL BE THE MAIN DANGER!** As soon as a landlord serves an eviction notice, get your tenants together; try to get the help of your neighbors and the neighborhood tenants' organization; and get busy.

How to Fight Evictions

(4) **WHAT TO DO IN CASE OF AN EVICTION NOTICE!**—Tenants should utilize all possible legal technicalities to fight eviction moves. (If court action is indicated, cheap legal aid can usually be had from local trade unions and tenant organizations.) But remember that this is a fight that has to be fought by the tenants themselves; it can't be left in the hands of lawyers, even your lawyers. That means tenants threatened with eviction must do the following:

(a) **USE MASS PRESSURE.** Run picket lines around the house you live in or around the office of your landlord. If the landlord is a bank or an insurance company with offices in the main part of town—so much the better; picket those offices where thousands of people will see. **LET THE PEOPLE KNOW THAT "X" INSURANCE COMPANY OR "Y" BANK OR "Z" REAL ESTATE COMPANY IS TRYING TO THROW TENANTS OUT IN THE STREET!**

(b) **GET WIDE PUBLICITY.** Newspapers are sensitive to the rent problem these days. Notify the papers that you're going to picket. Have attractive placards.

Get wives and children out too; they're affected as much as anyone. Use imaginative stunts that will be good for pictures; in New York City some veterans pitched pup tents in front of the landlords' offices.

(c) **GET POPULAR SUPPORT.** Get all sorts of organizations—trade unions, veterans' groups, neighborhood clubs—to support you. Let them make miserable the life of the landlord who wants to throw you out, by bombarding him with protests, petitions. In that way the landlord will know that he has the great mass of the population against him. And get these organizations to join you in your picketing.

(d) If the eviction procedure goes through, remember the United Auto Workers Flying Squadrons plan in Detroit which promised to put back the furniture of any one who was evicted. That idea can be applied elsewhere. *No one should be thrown into the street just because a landlord wants more profit!*

Organize for an Offensive!

(5) **TENANT ORGANIZATION SHOULD WORK HAND IN GLOVE WITH THE LABOR MOVEMENT OF ITS CITY.** Most tenants are themselves workers and union members. A jump in rent is the same as a cut in wages. If the union fights against wage cuts, it should fight against rent increases. Get the unions out to help you; get them to set up housing committees for their city or area. The unions can and should be the bulwark of the tenants' fight.

(6) **Don't only take defensive measures; organize for the offensive.** Make a strict check on the services given you by your landlord. If any essential services are not provided, report him to your local Board of Health or Department of Housing or their local equivalent. You also have the right to request rent decreases from the local Office of Rent Control in cases where services have been decreased. Be vigilant in defense of your rights.

(7) Tenant organizations cannot concern themselves only with local issues. So long as there is no adequate housing program, there'll be a rent crisis. Together with trade unions, veteran groups and neighborhood clubs they should fight for such things as:

(a) Local legislation to declare a complete moratorium on evictions so long as there is a housing shortage.

(b) Local or state legislation to impose air-tight ceilings on rents.

(c) An adequate housing program to relieve the present shortage.

These, then, are a few of the things that have to be done immediately. Wherever there is a branch of the Workers Party—a party of militant socialism which fights for the rights of the workers and of all the poor—it stands ready and eager to help in the rent fight. That is why the Workers Party is publishing this pamphlet. In many areas, the Workers Party and its members are already deep in the fight in behalf of tenants' rights.

What Caused Rent Situation?

Now that we've discussed some of the things that have to be done immediately—when you organize your tenants' committee you'll discover other things to be done, in accordance with your local problem—let's take a look at the record to answer a few questions:

How did the rent situation get the way it is anyway?

Who is responsible for the rent situation?

What have the landlords been up to?

In a word: what is the background of the present rent crisis?

• • •

AMERICA has always had a shortage of decent houses. To speak about one-third of the nation being underhoused was something of an understatement.

6

Millions have always lived in slums—slums in the big cities, shacks in villages and on farms. Despite all of the wealth which this country had and could produce, American capitalism never provided decent housing for everyone.

Before the depression, there was a considerable building boom in America. In 1925 there were 937,000 housing units constructed. The reason for this comparatively large though still inadequate figure was that there was a housing shortage after the First World War when, incidentally, landlords tried the same rotten stunts they pull now. But during the depression housing lagged badly. In 1930 there were only 330,000 housing units constructed and in 1937—when FDR was supposed to have patched the jittery old capitalist system up a bit—there were only 336,000 units constructed. In 1941 there was a big jump: 715,000 housing units. That was the last splurge before housing construction ended.

So even before the war there was a shortage of housing—especially of decent housing. That fact is essential; remember it. In 1945 there were only 200,000 housing units constructed. Which means that since thousands of units are destroyed each year—through disintegration or fire or other causes—housing construction was not even keeping pace with the rate of housing deterioration.

During and after the war the housing situation became extreme. Thousands flocked to the cities to work in war plants. There were numerous marriages. Housing construction virtually stopped. Result: a tremendous housing shortage to the point where millions—literally millions—are without homes. You double up (alas) with your mother-in-law. You live in a trailer. You use up most of your wage for a hotel room. You move in on friends...and lose friendships. You pay more rent than you'd have ever dreamed of paying just to get a hole to park in. (And then you toss in a little "present" to the landlord, who makes it a condition for

7

giving you an apartment.) Or you fall prey to the "co-operative housing" and toss in whatever you saved for a rainy day.

But whatever you do, you don't get a decent apartment at a reasonable rental. That just isn't being done these days. Of course, you may have lived a good bit of your young life in a foxhole in France or in a fever-ridden hole in New Guinea or in a sub-zero quonset in Alaska, and dreamed then of coming back to a comfortable little place. But that was just a dream; a dream fed to you by the organized dream-feeding agencies of capitalism and its press and its armies.

• • •

DURING the war, there was rent control. There *had* to be—or the capitalist war effort would have been disrupted. And so long as there was any danger of that, the government made right sure that rent control was fairly tight. For if there hadn't been rent control the landlords would have gone hog-wild, especially in the war-production centers, and that would have created all sorts of difficulties for the war-production program. That's why there was rent control.

As soon as the war was over, the landlords got to work. Now who are these landlords? Are they some *special* group of devils? No, they're not a *special* group; they're the *usual* group of... They're the very same bankers, investment houses, insurance companies, capitalists who try to skin you alive in the factories and shops and who then skin you again in the stores. The same capitalist who has investments, say, in the plant you work in and gets profits from your sweat, is the one who has investments in the food packing company which charges you outrageous prices for meat and who has investments in the real estate company which tries to extort fantastic rents from you. The landlords are part of the capitalist class—the enemy of the workers and poor people on every front.

Congress Helps the Landlords

One thing you have to say about the landlords: *they* were and are organized. Behind all their phony names—we can't waste the space here to list the high-sounding titles by which they disguise themselves—they steadily worked away to knife rent control and to prevent low cost public housing. What they wanted was a continued housing shortage and a green light to charge as much rent as they could.

In this noble cause they were helped by their cronies in Washington. It stood to reason that the Congress which passed the Taft-Hartley Anti-Labor Bill—designed as a deadly blow at the rights of American workers—would also be receptive to the desires of the landlords. Congress was ready to do well by every section of... the capitalist class. And so under the leadership of Senator R. A. Taft, the reactionary Republican zomble from Ohio, and the lynch-mob Democratic Senators from the South (who intoned Claghornish speeches about "rent control is against ahr institutions, suh...") Congress cooked up that rotten, phony, crooked rent decontrol bill as full of holes as a used-up lottery punchboard. And these enemies of the American people, calling themselves representatives of the American people, passed the bill.

And Truman signed it.

He said he had to, that if he didn't sign it there'd be no rent control at all. But that was just a weak excuse for knuckling under to the landlord lobby, which had done a terrific job in Washington. For already the OPA, with Truman's tacit approval, had given the landlords monetary lollipop after lollipop; it had rushed to the defense of poor, stricken landlords (suffering under the burden of the biggest profit rake in history) with that nonsense about "hardship cases." And Truman had let it get through.

Naturally he signed the bill. It was part of the whole trend of the capitalist government in Washington—part

of the trend which wrecked price control and passed the Slave Labor Act, part of the trend which shelved the anti-lynching bill and knifed the minimum wage bill. It was the trend to open attack on the workers and the poor people, where formerly there'd been a relatively disguised attack.

Landlord Profits Shoot Upward

Then came the deluge. Landlords began to put pressure on tenants. Hotels, which had been completely decontrolled by this new legislation, increased rentals up to 400 per cent. (One case was reported in Colorado where a man was charged more rent per month than he earned at his job.) The landlords cried that they were at last getting "justice"—increases in rent to make up for increases in costs. Well, let's take a glance back and see if that is so.

Here are some facts. According to a recent survey initiated by the Office of Price Administration, landlords of large apartment houses increased their net operating income during 1945 by 25 per cent over their net operating income in 1939. (Net operating income refers to the landlord's profits after all expenses are paid.) Similarly, landlords of small houses (those containing less than five apartments) increased their net operating income by 43 per cent.

One of the main reasons why landlord profits increased was that they no longer had vacancies to cut down their profits. During pre-war years there was a "normal" vacancy rate of 15 to 20 per cent in apartment houses; landlords' profits were calculated on that assumption. In 1939 when there was already a housing squeeze that vacancy rate dropped to 9 per cent. And of course during the last few years it dropped to zero. Thus, even during the years when rents were stationary, landlords got a greater total profit from their properties. Which proves that all their weeping about "losing money" was hokum.

For the fact is that during the year of 1944, landlords took in a total profit of \$1,180,000,000—nearly twice as much as in 1940.

The same OPA report to which we have referred said further: "While wage rates and prices increased considerably during the war, landlords' total expenditures were kept close to the 1939 amount." For large apartments, expenses rose five per cent but for small ones expenses actually dropped seven per cent.

And finally there was always the OPA around to help the landlords. The OPA lent a willing ear to landlords when they complained about "hardships" and since rent control went into effect it has granted over a million individual rent increases. The rate of granting rent increases has gone up: for example, from August to September 1946 it doubled. Since September 1946 it has continued to go up. The landlords have found a helping hand in the OPA.

Mind you, we aren't worried at all about landlord profits. We have presented these facts here just to show what liars and hypocrites they are when they scream about the "need" for greater rent levels. But even if the landlords were not doing well, even if they had to struggle along on a mere 50 million a year profit level rather than a 1 billion a year profit level, that wouldn't be any skin off our back or yours. Our primary interest is in the poor people of this country—the great mass of workers, lower salaried employees, professionals, etc., who are having one devil of a time trying to make ends meet in this time of inflationary price rises. It is their interest—the interest of the vast majority of the people that comes first, last and always—not the interest of the landlords.

• • •

WHAT happened after the new rent bill was passed is so well known that we don't have to go into much detail on it here. The landlords had a field day—or they thought so. Hotel owners started jacking

up rents as if they were bidding in pinochle. Landlords started coercing tenants to sign leases with rent increases with none too subtle hints that if tenants refused they'd be evicted when federal rent control went out of existence.

Congress had given the landlords a blackjack to use against tenants—and the landlords used it!

What We Got from the "Present"

And landlords devised all sorts of new schemes to work it rich. They had people, desperate for a place to live, "buy" an apartment and then proceeded to evict the tenants of the apartment that had been "bought." (This was an "improved" variant of the scheme whereby prospective tenants are forced to pay several hundred dollars on the sly in order to get an apartment.)

The landlords had still another possibility—the most dangerous of all for tenants. The new law has a loophole wide as a barn which says that a landlord can evict a tenant if he needs the place for himself or if he intends to "renovate" the apartment. After such renovations, the apartment is no longer under rent control and the disadvantages of this are obvious to the tenant. So the landlords have started a swarm of eviction proceedings.

In New York City alone the number of eviction warrants issued from July 1 to July 7 increased 82 per cent over the corresponding period of a year back. In Cleveland two additional judges were assigned during the same week to hear eviction cases in municipal courts. In Detroit court calendars are jammed with eviction cases. Thousands of people are in danger of being thrown out into the street!

That is the result of the mess cooked up by the capitalist politicians in Congress. Even where tenants succeed in fighting off evictions, they will have to lay out hard-earned money for court expenses. (The new law takes evictions out of the hands of the rent control agencies and puts it directly into the hands of the courts

—courts which have never been notorious as defenders of rights of the poor.) This is the "present" they have given to us. Let us remember that "present" by organizing our own party, a party of independent labor politics, and driving the agents of capitalism out of Washington.

• • •

THAT, in brief, is the rent situation. It is a highly explosive situation, one which will explode in the faces of millions of workers unless they act and organize now. We have already mentioned our main ideas on what to do, at the very beginning of this pamphlet. Here we should just like to say a few words on housing in general before we wind up on the rent situation again.

Obviously, if there were enough housing, there'd be no rent problem. Then you could tell your landlord to go fly a kite (or some colorful variant thereof) when he asked for a rent increase, and find yourself another place to live. But now you can't do that. We've mentioned before that the reason for this is that housing virtually came to a standstill while the American capitalist government was at war.

Rent, Housing and Capitalism

But here we come up against an interesting question. We're not going to enter into a long discussion of housing plans here. But we think that LABOR ACTION, a weekly socialist paper hit the nail on the head when it recently wrote:

"Let's put the matter in its most basic form. Here's a situation where millions of people are without housing. . . . There is no evidence that sufficient housing will be built in the coming period. Private housing construction is not doing the job—and the houses that private contractors are building are obviously at too high a rate for most people.

"An interesting question arises:

"Why doesn't the government step in, set up a gigantic housing program on a low rental basis; run the housing program so that landlord profit may be eliminated and break all material bottlenecks that exist, as they were broken during the war?

"The job was done for tanks and planes and ammunition. When the government dominated industry then, nobody cockled anything about 'private enterprise.'

"IF THAT COULD BE DONE FOR TANKS AND GUNS, WHY NOT FOR HOUSES?"

"Or are houses less important than tanks and guns?"

"Let's put it this way. Capitalist society, in which we live, is more interested in providing weapons of destruction than in providing decent places for people to live. That isn't merely our opinion. It is a fact which anyone can prove to himself by merely comparing the record of the government during the war on armament production and its record after the war on housing.

"And there is no more damning contrast on the rottenness of capitalist society."

• • •

BUT let's get back to the immediate situation. As we said in our first paragraph, this is a call to action. We hope the first thing you do after reading this pamphlet is get a tenants group organized in your house, or that if you have one, you galvanize it into action.

Already there are encouraging reports from various parts of the country. The Detroit Times of July 10 reports that 250 tenants of the Blaine Tenants Council met in a local high school and pledged themselves to refuse to pay more rent. That's the way.

We Can Fight Back!

In New York City, tenants of a section of the lower East Side have set up a tenants' group called the University Tenants Council which even has a grievance committee that functions regularly and takes up day-to-day tenants' complaints. This group is affiliated to a larger tenants' organization which takes in the entire lower East Side.

Other tenant outfits have been organized in various parts of the city.

The writer of this pamphlet participated in an interesting tenant action a few months back. He was then living in a renovated rat hole (and we mean rat hole!)

on which the landlord was getting rich but for which he refused to give any repairs. The tenants organized and when the landlord gave them no satisfaction, the tenants all discovered at the first of the month that they just couldn't get around to paying rent. They were all simultaneously broke. The landlord got the idea and started making his repairs; the tenants were no longer all broke.

In fact, rent strikes have a great tradition in this country; they're not just a stunt thought by up "reds." If you can strike against your boss because he doesn't give you enough money, why not strike against your landlord when he takes away too much money? After the last war, there was a great wave of rent strikes and there was one during the depression. That's something to keep in mind for the rough days ahead.

So there it is, folks. Landlords out to skin us alive—and if we want to prevent that, we must organize. The Workers Party again urges you to:

- ORGANIZE TENANTS' COMMITTEES.
- FIGHT FOR LEGISLATION TO DECLARE A MORATORIUM ON EVICTIONS.
- FIGHT TO PREVENT EVICTIONS OF ANY OF YOUR NEIGHBORS.
- DON'T PAY MORE RENT!